

CHRISTMAS IN ROCKY BEACH by Mark Zahn

Based on characters created by Robert Arthur

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HELLO. Jupiter Jones here. You're probably wondering why I am writing up the details of this mystery instead of Bob Andrews. Let me explain. We had just wrapped up a minor case earlier this week that Pete wanted to call: The Secret of the Seven Santas. As you know, we always present our case-files to Alfred Hitchcock for review once Bob has typed up the notes. Other than it being a chilly Christmas Eve, today was no different than any other. When our meeting with Mr. Hitchcock ended, Worthington drove us back to the Jones Salvage Yard in the Rolls Royce. "You may want to direct your attention to the heavens as you exit the vehicle," Worthington had said. We looked up at the sky as he advised, and were amazed to see a tiny scattering of snowflakes that melted as soon as they hit the ground. A strange sight indeed in Southern California!

"Good grief - it's snowing!" Pete said in wonder, trying to catch snowflakes on his tongue. I leaned inside the driver side door of the Rolls and handed Worthington a small box wrapped in red paper with a green bow on top. "A gift from all three of us," I explained. Worthington opened the box solemnly and smiled. Inside was an antique pocketwatch and chain. On the inside of the watch's cover, three "???" had been engraved. "My goodness," Worthington murmured, "it's beautiful. Thank you lads, I shall cherish it." "It's the least we could do for all your hard work over the years," I explained. "And for making you work on Christmas Eve," Pete said sheepishly. "Merry Christmas, Worthington," Bob sang. "And happy New Year," Pete and I added. The tall English chauffeur smiled warmly and tipped his cap. "A very merry Christmas to you and your families," he replied. The streetlights were just starting to flicker on as Worthington drove off down the street. We entered the salvage yard through Green Gate One so Bob and Pete could retrieve their bicycles. Pete zipped his parka up to his chin and shivered. "Brrr ---- I wish I would have worn a cap!" Bob laughed. "Tell me about it. I'm still wearing a spring jacket!" The two Investigators pushed their bicycles out the secret gate. As we had exchanged gifts earlier, I simply said goodbye and wished them a merry Christmas. "Merry Christmas, Juve!" they cried out over their shoulders. As I went through the routine of locking up the yard for the night, I was surprised to see Chief Reynolds' police cruiser pull up in front of the yard's large iron gates. I snapped the padlock in place and walked to the car. The Chief had

rolled down the passenger side window - I rested my elbows on the door and smiled. "Merry Christmas, Chief!"

As was his nature, Chief Reynolds scowled and gulped coffee from a styrofoam cup. "It may be merry for you, Jones, but I've got more problems than Santa with five sick reindeer!" He rubbed his chin as if thinking hard. "Say, maybe I could use you. You're good at finding lost things aren't you?" I nodded my head to this and grunted an affirmative. "I'll guess we'll see how good you really are. Someone has stolen the Hildebrand Diamonds!"

"The Hildebrand Diamonds!" I cried. The Hildebrand Diamonds are one of the most famous pieces of jewelry in the world ---- and they're located right here in Rocky Beach! The Hildebrand's are one of Rocky Beach's oldest and most wealthy families. They made their fortune off the oil rigs in Northern

California, and real estate ventures in the South. The diamonds were a Christmas gift from Mr. Hildebrand to his wife thirty years ago. Legend has it they once belonged to the wife of a railroad baron. The Baron is said to have received the jewels as a reward for saving the life of the Queen of England when her horse went wild and nearly dashed off the edge of a cliff.

"I'm working with a skeleton crew down at the station," the Chief continued. "I can't spare any men, so I'm on my own on this one. Hop in. Maybe with your eyes I can crack this case and be home in time for turkey!"

"Just let me tell Aunt Mathilda," I cried, racing to our house across the street. With that done, I leaped inside the cruiser and Chief Reynolds started driving up into the hills of Rocky Beach. "Aunt Mathilda was pretty sore at me for leaving," I said. "She's cooking a big dinner. I was supposed to help her with the mashed potatoes." The Christmas lights twinkled on the rooftops as we entered a wealthy neighborhood on Rocky Beach's North side. The Chief drove the car up a long, circular drive, then parked in front of the Hildebrand's sprawling mansion. "Remember, this is a crime scene," the Chief said, "keep your eyes open and try not to touch anything!"

I nodded my head as we walked up the large steps to the front door. The Chief rang the bell and we were quickly admitted into the house by a stuffy looking butler. "Good evening, Chief Reynolds. My name is Jeeves," he said in a rather bored voice. He took our coats, pausing to look at my Hawaiian-style shirt with the Santas-in-swimsuits pattern with obvious displeasure. "Mrs. Hildebrand is in the dining room," he yawned. "Right this way."

We were led through a dim hallway, past a billiard room and study, then entered into the last door on the left. A fire was burning in the fireplace, and

Christmas music was still playing softly in the background. A large table, nearly twenty feet long, sat in the middle of the room. Soiled plates, glasses, and silverware were still arranged on the table as if a party had just ended moments before. It looked as if the guests had eaten well. Nearly every entree, including dessert, was completely gone. In fact, the only dish remaining, as far as I could see, was a rather uninviting ring of fruitcake that remained completely untouched on a platter in the center of the table.

A sophisticated woman of about thirty, wearing a dark green velvet dress and matching gloves that went to her elbows, stood over an older woman, consoling her. The older woman, sitting in a chair and sniffing into a lace handkerchief, was a large, robust woman of about sixty. She wore a plum satin dress and her hair was neatly styled. She gently brushed a small Pomeranian on her lap between dabs at her nose with the handkerchief. The dog barked as we entered the room. "Hush up, Cookie," the older woman sobbed, "the police are here now. They'll find mommie's diamonds." Chief Reynolds gave me a look like he just smelled something sour, then introduced himself. "And this young man is Jupiter Jones," he continued. "He has a knack for finding lost items. I thought he might be of assistance." The elderly woman nodded and whimpered into her tissue. The younger woman at her side suddenly spoke up. "I'll tell you where to look for the diamonds," she said bitterly. "Just go to that shack Cole Jordan calls a home. They're probably hidden under his mattress - if he hasn't sold them already!"

The plump woman in the chair gasped, and fresh tears rolled down her cheeks. "Don't say such a thing, Alexandra! Cole is such a nice young man!" Chief Reynolds took out his notepad and a pen. "And who is this Jordan character?" The woman named Alexandra sneered. "A local artist, among other things. I used to date him until I found out he was a thief! The man has a record as long as my arm!" Chief Reynolds rubbed his chin. "Funny, I don't recall seeing his name come across my desk." The young woman scoffed. "Well, you wouldn't. He claimed he cleaned up his act after he moved to Rocky Beach. But I think he planned to move here. He planned meeting me. He planned getting into this house. All for the diamonds!"

"He was in this house tonight?" I asked. The elderly woman sniffed and shook her head. "Not tonight. This afternoon. Cole was putting the finishing touches on the painting." She pointed a pudgy finger to a huge oil painting that hung above the fireplace. A man, presumably Mr. Hildebrand, stood next to his wife. He wore the clothes of an English aristocrat about to go on a fox-hunt, and she was wearing the same dress she had on now. In the

painting, an elegant string of diamonds hung around her neck. “I wanted the painting finished in time for the party tonight,” she whimpered.

“Mother was having problems with the clasp on the necklace,” Alexandra explained. “Just as Cole was finishing up the painting last week – the necklace was the last thing he painted - the clasp broke and Mother had to have it fixed. That took the better part of a week. The jeweler said he could only make a temporary repair. A more permanent fix would require putting on a brand new clasp. Well, Mother wanted to keep the necklace in its original condition. She only wore the thing once or twice a year, so a temporary fix would do.”

“When the diamonds were returned yesterday, Cole agreed to come back today to complete his work.” Chief Reynolds asked the obvious question in a case like this: “When did you notice the diamonds were missing?” The elderly woman scratched her dog’s head. “There was so much to do today,” she explained. “Even though I have servants and maids and cooks, I like to help out as much as I can.”

“It’s true,” Alexandra agreed. “I always tell Mother: ‘relax, that’s what you have servants for!’ But she always insists on helping out in the kitchen.” I pinched my lip and thought for a second. A rather strange line of thought had arisen in mind, but I decided to follow it to see where it would lead. “Mrs. Hildebrand - can you trace back your movements today? Describe everything you did from the moment Cole Jordan left your house to the moment you noticed the diamonds were missing?”

The heavy-set woman sighed and leaned back in her chair. She ran a brush across the dog’s back and thought for a moment. “Naturally, I had the diamonds on when Cole was here,” she began, “because that is what he wanted to paint. He nearly didn’t get it finished. The painting was hung above the mantle at five-thirty, and the party was at seven. I didn’t even have time to change! I remember putting an apron on over my dress - I don’t recall if I was still wearing the diamonds or not. Then I went into the kitchen. I remember being upset because there was no fruitcake! Who can have a Christmas party without fruitcake? So I started to make one. Combining the nuts, figs, fruit, and so forth. I know you’re supposed to refrigerate it for several weeks before serving, but I’ve never cared for liqueur. I just make it and serve it the same day.”

“Mother, get to the point,” her daughter sighed. “Yes dear,” Mrs. Hildebrand tittered. “Well, it was very busy in the house - particularly in the kitchen. A million things to do, you know. People were coming and going. I even took a telephone call from my broker while I was pouring the mixture into the cake pan! I was answering the staff’s questions, tying my husband’s

tie, answering the phone, and trying to keep my dress clean for the party! Why - before I knew it, the bell was ringing and Jeeves was answering the door! I never stopped to think if my diamonds were still on!" "So when, precisely, did you notice they were missing?" I asked. The portly woman's bottom lip trembled as she recalled the scene. "It wasn't until the end of the party. We were just finishing up dessert when Joseph, my husband, asked me why I had decided to take off the diamonds. Well, I nearly fell off my chair in a dead faint! I'm afraid I got quite hysterical. It took two snifters of brandy before I was able to calm down. Naturally, the guests were startled and immediately made excuses to go home. They are all above suspicion, of course, so Joseph permitted them to leave. When Jeeves had seen them out, the staff began a thorough search of the house. We left the dining room in disarray so the police might search it for clues."

Just then the front door slammed open and a great commotion was heard out in the hall. Chief Reynolds and I whirled to the door and stared, wide-eyed, as the man in the painting, Mr. Hildebrand, barged into the room. The dog started barking madly, and nearly jumped off the old woman's lap. Hildebrand had a young man by the shirt collar, one arm wrenched behind his back. "I've got the scoundrel!" the older man roared. "Now we'll get to the bottom of this!" Mrs. Hildebrand clutched the dog to her chest. "Joseph! What are you doing? Unhand that poor man!"

"I was a fool to trust him the first time!" Hildebrand raged. "I won't let him get away again!" The younger man struggled to free himself. His shabby clothes and unkept hair made him look like a wild man. Finally Chief Reynolds stepped in. "Let him go, Joe. You've no proof he stole the diamonds." The older man's face turned red as he unhandled the artist. "He's a thief! The diamonds have been safe in this house for thirty years until this scoundrel appears. Suddenly they're gone! Now you tell me who's the likely suspect?"

Everyone stared at Chief Reynolds, waiting for him to reply. The Chief sighed and massaged his temples. Finally, he looked at me and shrugged his shoulders. "It is mighty suspicious that Jordan appears and the diamonds go missing," he muttered. "If you have any ideas, now would be the time for them, Jones." All eyes turned to me as I pinched my lip and paced about the room. "Who is this kid?" Joseph Hildebrand wondered aloud. "The fate of the Hildebrand Diamonds is in the hands of a no-good brat?" I stopped pacing and smiled at the old man. "Actually," I chuckled, "the fate of the Hildebrand Diamonds is in the hands of a poorly executed recipe!"

The faces in the room were clouded with confusion. "What in tarnation is he talking about, Sam?" the old man roared at Chief Reynolds. The Chief

looked at me, perplexed. “Would you care to elaborate, Jones?” I smiled and walked over to the dining room table. “Certainly. But before I do, would you mind, Mrs. Hildebrand, if I helped myself to a slice of your fruitcake? It looks delicious!” The plump woman smiled graciously and told me to have as much as I liked. Her husband, shaking with anger, looked as if he might explode. I bypassed the knives and pie-servers and reached for the fruitcake with my bare hands. Mr. and Mrs. Hildebrand, their daughter, Cole Jordan, and Chief Reynolds all watched with open mouths. I tore into the soft, sticky cake - scattering crumbs and fruit everywhere. The dog leaped from Mrs. Hildebrand’s lap and began eating the crumbs from the floor. My hands felt around in the suspect dessert until I found what I was looking for. Even with morsels of cake and gooey fruit clinging to it, they were still a spectacular site. With a triumphant grin, I held them up for everyone to see. The Hildebrand Diamonds!

Chief Reynolds shook his head and laughed as he drove me back to the salvage yard. “How you guessed the diamonds were inside the cake, I’ll never know!” I looked out the window of the cruiser and smiled. A silver moon cast a shimmering glow to the snowflakes that were still falling. They almost seemed like diamonds themselves, the way they sparkled and danced. “It wasn’t a guess,” I replied. “Simply a deduction based upon the facts. A faulty necklace clasp and a woman doing too many things at once.” The Chief smiled as he pulled up in front of my house. “Thanks a lot, Jones. I owe you one.” I shook my head. “Forget it. Consider it an early Christmas present. Now get home and have some turkey!” He laughed as I shut the door, then drove off down the street, waving goodbye as he went.

The windows of Uncle Titus and Aunt Mathilda’s house were glowing warmly, and inside I could hear Hans and Konrad booming out one of their favorite Bavarian Christmas carols. I was sorely tempted to skip the write-up, but remembered that tomorrow was Christmas day. Besides, I wanted to get the facts down while they were still fresh in my mind. I know I don’t have Bob’s flair for words, but I hope I presented this case in a manner that was at least fairly interesting. I think I’ll leave this case-folder out for Bob to put away after Christmas. He has his own filing system and I don’t want to mess it up.

P.S. Merry Christmas from The Three Investigators!